DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 199 CG 022 644

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TITLE Helping the Helpers: Teacher Support Groups.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Guides - General (050)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counselor Role; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; *Employee Assistance Programs; *School Counselors; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

As employee assistance programs become commonplace in business and industry, elementary school counselors are encouraged to use some professional time to help teachers and other school personnel through the development of in-school support groups. This document supports the view that school counselors should become involved in developing support groups for teachers and presents several ideas for developing such groups. It begins by briefly reviewing teacher stress and burnout and other sources of work stress as a way of establishing the need for support groups in the school. A section on starting support groups for teachers looks at types of support groups and presents questions a potential leader might consider in developing a support group. Helpful qualities of group members are identified and hints are given on getting started. The remainder of the paper presents a sampler of topics or themes that may stimulate ideas for readers who wish to begin or enlarge a program of teacher support groups for professional and paraprofessional employees in schools. Topics discussed include: (1) newcomers support group; (2) retiring teachers support group; (3) support groups for teachers experiencing loss; and (4) a list of 26 other ideas and themes. (NB)

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HELPING THE HELPERS: TEACHER SUPPORT GROUPS

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Abstract

As Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) become commonplace in business and industry, elementary counselors are encouraged to use some professional time to help teachers and other school personnel through the development of in-school support groups.

Background

The expansion of employee assistance programs (EAPs) in business and industry has been phenomenal during the the 1980s (Smither, 1988). Since EAPs are usually staffed with individuals with backgrounds in counseling or similar helping professions (e.g.,social work, clinical psychology, or nursing), adults in the work force are, in increasing numbers, able to use the services of a trained, in-house, human services specialist to reduce stress, increase coping skills and competence, improve self-esteem, and engage in a work-related support group. While large institutions may provide EAP services in a variety of patterns, elementary or middle schools are not likely to have such services readily available for principals, teachers, aides, cafeteria workers, custodians, and other care-givers of the children who attend such schools. It is time for school counselors to use some of their time to help the helpers, especially teachers, through developing prevention programs and support groups.

Stress of Teaching

Anyone who reads educational journals, newspapers, and news magazines knows that American education, especially at the elementary and secondary level, has been heavily criticized during the last five years. In addition to the public criticism, many teachers are unhappy with the salaries, the limited status, and the difficult work conditions. Ornstein (1981) suggests that issues of stress and burnout have added to teacher concerns:

> Evidence is accumulating to prove that many teachers experience a good deal of physical, and/or mental suffering because of their job, with little professional help provided. The result is burnout or total abandonment of the profession. While teacher organizations and school districts are just beginning to recognize the twin problems of teacher stress and burnout, they must now provide specific strategies for coping with these problems. (p. 74)

Morgan and Krehbiel (1985) have suggested that the term "burnout" can be used to describe four situations:

> (a) not coping, in terms of physical or mental health; (b) not functioning competently on the job; (c) being job competent but feeling weary, unfulfilled, and bored; and (d) actually quitting the job.... (p. 59)

Another factor contributing to teacher concerns is the sense of isolation experienced by many classroom teachers. Not only are schools organized to physically isolate teachers, but training and

socialization of teachers often does little to encourage collegial interaction (Asp & Garbarino, 1983). As these authors suggest, "Teaching is a lonely job" (p. 256).

Problems that can occur in the lives of any adult - personal, relationships, family, health, concern over aging parents, financial difficulties, adjusting to a new community, preparation for retirement, to name several of the common issues - also add to the need for school districts providing supportive services for the professional and support staff members, as well as to students and, in some cases, their parents. To provide such services may, in fact, be wise use of counselor time and school district money. In introducing a special issue on primary prevention in schools for the April 1984 issue of Personnel and Guidance Journal, Shaw and Goodyear say in part:

> If we can prevent people from developing problems, there should ultimately be fewer problems to which we must attend. Moreover, because primary preventive tactics generally reach substantial numbers of people rather than only a few, primary prevention may be more cost effective, a not inconsiderable factor in an era of shrinking resources for human services. An even more important reason is suggested by evidence that provision of indirect services by relatively few service providers to certain key adults can result in significant and enduring benefits to the children for whom these adults bear responsibility....(p.446)

Hatch (1983) has suggested that support seminars for teachers can be used to reduce the isolation that they may experience in their daily work:

> Support seminars could give teachers a forum for venting their frustrations and finding support for their ideas and ideals. Support seminars could help teachers explore the vitality of collaborative decision making and recognize the potential impact that a group of dedicated professionals can have on educational systems, from classrooms on out. And, support seminars could provide an atmosphere in which the fundamental issues which entangle educators today are confronted directly and dealt with rationally and creatively. (p. 81)

Other Sources of Work Stress

As suggested above, the sources of work stress may originate at the place of employment or at sources external to the work site. Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) devote a chapter of their volume to sources of stress, where they describe physical *environment stressors*,

extraorganizational stressors , including the family, relocation, economic and financial stressors, *residential stressors* , such as transportation, road conditions, climate, local taxes, conditions of housing, convenience of services and shopping, degree of noise and air pollution, and *organizational stressors*, such as job design, role conflicts, role ambiguity, work overload, inadequate career development opportunities, organizational climate, leadership relationships, and lack of performance feedback.

Starting Support Groups for Teachers

Pearson (1986) suggests that both professional and peer-led support groups can be conceptualized as "surrogate support systems that fill gaps in people's lives created by the absence, limitations, or dysfunctionality of their natural support systems" (p. 67). Paquette (1987) adds that the functional ability of teachers "...can be enhanced through a collegial support system that values growth activities, provides moral support, and facilitates small groups" (p. 37). How, then, can an elementary or middle school counselor develop such surrogate support systems for the professional staff in each school you serve?

Types of support groups. Stanford and Perdue (1983) suggest that several types of groups can be formed, including education, sharing and emotional support, socializing and recreation, and professional support. Depending on the purpose of the groups, the goals can vary and include sharing, emotional support, new knowledge, new skills and behavior, and task accomplishment. These writers also described several questions a potential leader needs to address in developing a support group. Their list includes: (1) Whom is the group to serve? (2) Why am I developing a group? (3) What will we do at our meetings? (4) How will members be recruited? (5) Will members be prescreened? (6) Will the membership be open or closed? (7) How large will the group be? (8) Will the group be limited in time or ongoing? (9) How long will the meetings last? (10) Where will the group meet? (11) Who will serve as leaders?

Helpful qualities of group members. In describing a well-functioning family, Williams (1980) identified commitment, adaptation, mutuality, differentiation, and intimacy as the components desirable in each family member. In a similar manner, these traits can be redefined as desirable qualities to be found in each person engaged in a teacher support group:
Commitment - pledge to be responsible to and for other members of the faculty/staff; *Adaption* - assisting others to adjust in times of stress; *Mutuality* - sharing in meeting needs of staff/faculty members;

Differentiation - allowing, encouraging, supporting colleagues as they grow professionally and personally; *Intimacy* - the demonstrated caring relationship among staff/faculty members. Kent (1985) adds that the teamwork skills of "...setting goals, solving problems, and keeping high morale are also valued" (p. 33).

Getting started. Depending on the size of the school district and the number of counselors employed and buildings served, getting started can range from a very informal invitation to a few teachers to meet for breakfast once a week to the development and distribution of a more formal interest survey. The purpose of the group and the time and location of meetings may determine how large the group can be, how often it will meet, and if faculty members joining the group will be from one or more schools. School districts having more than one counselor interested in leading support groups are able to offer different formats, purposes, locations for sub-populations to be served. Opportunities for participation should be available to all faculty and staff personnel, and, at the same time, no one should be forced to participate. In some cases, group facilitation could be shared with other professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, nurses, physical education instructors, or others willing to provide services for their colleagues.

A Sampler of Teacher Support Group Topics and Themes

Having stated a case for counselors using some of their professional time to help the helpers, what follows is a sampler of topics or themes that may stimulate ideas for the readers who wish to begin or enlarge a program of teacher support groups for the professional and paraprofessional employees in the schools they serve.

1. Newcomers support group. The new teacher, especially if he or she is new to the community and without previous teaching experience, has many concerns, can feel particularly isolated (especially if there is an age gap with the veteran teachers). Support for getting a good start professionally, socially, and culturally can go far in making the first year of teaching manageable for the newcomer. This group can be composed of newcomers and seasoned personnel.

2. Retiring teachers support group. While teachers may have an advantage over other types of workers in preparing for retirement, in that they have had summers off to practice a different lifestyle, many can benefit from the support of others as they prepare for retirement and plan for this major step in their lives.

3. Support groups for teachers experiencing loss. Death, divorce, or other types of loss can create difficulties for those experiencing such events. To have compassionate friends and the opportunity to grieve in an understanding environment can help the healing process for these individuals.

4. Other ideas and themes. Without detail, these ideas and themes have been used or could be used for the establishment of other types of support groups, seminars, for informal meetings: (a) Money management, (b) Health, (c) Leisure, (d) Decision making, (e) Planning for change, (f) Communication skills development, (g) Improving work relationships, (h) Self renewal, (i) Career planning, (j) Physical fitness/recreational sports, (k) Educational opportunities (formal and informal), (l) Social/entertainment opportunities, (m) HALT workshops: Don't get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired, (n) Relaxation exercise training, (o) Blood pressure check-in groups, (p) Weight reduction contests/nutrition awareness, (q) Slimnastics, walking/jogging groups, (r) Transactional analysis for teachers, (s) Teacher Effectiveness Training concepts for teachers, (t) Stress workshops for educators, (u) Resume development workshop, (v) Discussion groups (based on taped lectures, books, movies, etc.), (w) HELPING workshop (Health, Emotions/feelings, Learning/school, People/personal relationships, Imagination/interests, Need to know/think, Guidance of acts, behavior, consequences) - see Keat (1979), (x) Special interest groups (arts and crafts, dramatics, book clubs, to name a few possibilities), (y) Travel groups, and (z) Breakfast or dinner groups.

There are many options and opportunities for school counselors to be instrumental in improving the mental health and well-being of their professional colleagues within the school system. The task is to uncover the needs and interests of these individuals and then to begin programs that will benefit them. These programs should enable the staff to approach their duties as educators with enthusiasm and with the knowledge that support among their peers is available at all times. As Norback (1986) notes,

Setting up an employee counseling program - known in some companies as an employee assistance program - greatly increases employee morale because it demonstrates to workers that the company cares about them as individuals. All the people working at your company have personal problems of one type or another....Having a source of help available on company premises can encourage employees to voluntarily seek aid before their problems become overwhelming. (Section 3.6).

In closing, it seems that in most school counselors are sources of help for educational colleagues, and it is appropriate for such individuals to develop support groups for staff and faculty to reduce

personal problems and work-related stress and increase staff morale and support systems in the process. Perhaps readers have other ideas that have worked in supporting the teaching staff where you work. If so, counselors are encouraged to share these ideas at conferences or through new manuscripts submitted to this journal.

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